

*Lydia Harder, May 12, 2013*

**“In Every Seed a Promise”**

I had an old sermon all ready for this morning---I thought I could massage it so that it would fit for this context. I know when I do that, I have a more difficult time really communicating what I want to say. But hey, in the interest of time!!

And then there was an interruption. I went to the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada's meetings in Kitchener and was caught off guard. An old passage of Scripture that I had worked on for my dissertation took on new meaning. And I knew the passages of Scripture used at that gathering had a message for us today.

Twenty five years ago when we moved to Ontario we also moved into a new Mennonite context. Now those of you who do not have traditional Mennonite roots have probably caught on that “traditional” Mennonites do not all think alike. And what Mennonites did traditionally when that happened, was separate into distinct conferences. 25 years ago there were 3 groups of Mennonites in Eastern Canada who had separated from each other and from other branches of Mennonites over the last 100 years or so. There was the Mennonite Conference usually called the “Old Mennonite” conference who traced its roots to the Anabaptists in Switzerland; the General conference Mennonites had separated from them because they were too conservative! And there was the United Mennonite Conference who had come from Ukraine, immigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were part of the General Conference of Mennonites. The Mennonite Brethren had separated from them because they were not evangelical enough! And then there was the Western Conference Mennonites who had separated from the Amish over their conservative ways. Did you get all that?? Though that is a much too simplistic way of describing what happened, it is true that Mennonites separated because they were sure that they were right and the others were wrong.

But 25 years ago these three distinct groups of Mennonites decided that separating did not make sense any longer. So they formed MCEC, as we generally know it, in order to do the work of the church together. I remember 25 years ago being at the service celebrating this new

venture. But I also remember discussions with my Dad and Mom who were mourning the loss of their small intimate conference, even as they welcomed the larger connections that this new organization gave. But for us coming into Ontario this new venture was a sign of hope—that we Mennonites had found a different way to relate to each other, even when we disagreed with each other about something.

The theme chosen for this celebration was “In Every Seed a Promise”. Throughout the weekend we focussed on three parables using the seed metaphor. The organizers of the celebration were convinced that the seeds planted 25 years ago were now bringing forth fruit. But they also suggested that on this day of celebration, God was planting seeds again. Yet I wondered what new things those old parables could say to us.

But several things contributed to a deeper and perhaps a different understanding of those stories that Jesus told.

- a) First of all, we sang the message of the parables in many ways from 4 part harmony, to jazz , to simple chorus, to new music composed only in the last few years, to songs from a variety of different cultural heritages. Gary has suggested that parables have something in common with music. I will read a section from his writings that illustrates this” P. 26-27.

Yes, parables like music and art challenge us to listen more deeply so we can truly understand !!

- b) We had visual symbols in front of us that both opened the parables to us and simultaneously hid them from us. There was someone dressed as an old time farmer, spreading the seeds, each time philosophically asking new questions about the seed or the soil. There were the short movie clips (which we will show you this morning) that stimulated the imagination. There were people who gave brief 3 minute talks about the “seed” that they felt was beginning to sprout in them.

All of this created the space to ask us the question: where we like the seed, the soil, the farmer or someone waiting and watching for the seed grow?

I. Listen to the first seed parable of Jesus and think about that question:

- a) Parable
- b) Video clip

In my earlier interpretations of the seed parables, I had given most of my attention to different types of soil. I had focussed on the kind of soil we are as people, as a church, wondering whether we are more like rocky soil, or like the soil overcome by weeds. The question that came through most strongly for me this time was the question: what kind of seed was God sowing during the time that MCEC was born? What kind of fruit do we now see growing? Which seeds have been choked out by weeds? Which seeds fell on the hard rocky path?

Sue Steiner, the speaker on Friday evening suggested the following as seeds that she sees flowering among us as a conference: seeds of compassion, seeds of resilience and hope; seeds of reciprocity amidst our diverse Anabaptist beauty; seeds of resourcefulness as we engage our communities; seeds of listening for God's Spirit in new ways.

If I now turn to this congregation in Montreal, I want to ask similar questions. What kind of seed was God sowing in the fellowship that began the church 35 years ago? Churches who were celebrating a significant anniversary this year were given a plaque and on Friday evening we celebrated that with dessert after the service. There were tables with a variety of tarts on them with the various plaques in the centre of the tables. So the whole conference was celebrating also with us—35 years of existence as a congregation. **But it is we who need to answer the question: What seed has God been planting among us?** Has it fallen along the way, among the weeds or on good soil? What fruit is being produced among us here?

**\*\*\* Have one of the children sow the seeds in the pot of dirt provided by MCEC.**

At our last congregational conversation we named some of the values that were important to us. Are these seeds that God is planting among us? What would you name as seed that is sprouting among us and maybe particularly in you today?

II.

- a) Scripture reading
- b) Video clip

If we name God as the sower, we also name God as the one who is growing the seed. This parable is all about who controls the growing of the seed.

The first parable is really asking what kind of soil we are. Is it soil that will bring forth fruit. And the picture of the sower that we got was of a generous God who scatters seed in every kind of soil. God does not discriminate and even when our hearts are closed to God's seed, God continues to sow.

This parable seems to say that we can do nothing to make the seed grow. We are only the soil. God is the one makes the seed grow by sending sunshine and rain. I thought about this as I looked around at the assembly. One of the seeds that I saw flourishing around me was the seed of hospitality—a seed of readiness to be engaged with each other as three groups of people each with their own history. This seed given to us by God was a willingness to learn to know each other deeply enough, so that a spirit of unity could make us into one group. But the fruit went beyond the three original groups of people.

At the assembly there were at least a dozen different language groups representing over 100 congregations. There were several new congregations asking to join this

conference. For example, there were several Ethiopian congregations, not churches who were the result of Mennonite mission efforts, but rather churches who were looking for a larger group to affiliate with here in Canada. These people were choosing Mennonites because they felt they shared the most values with them and had felt a warm welcome and invitation to become part of us.

It has been wonderful for us to come here and hear the stories of how individuals came to connect with this fellowship. We have the privilege of hearing many stories of how you came to be connected with this fellowship. God has sown the good seed of hospitality in this congregation. Many of you credit this fellowship with bringing you back to a worshipping community. But is it really we who have brought this assortment of people together into this place? Or is it God who is bringing people into our midst, people who enrich this congregation and who challenge us to a deeper relationship with God and with our community? Can we see the other as a gift from God for us, a gift that can flourish and grow and bring forth good fruit among us?

We can run around frantically, trying to make good seed grow among us, when God is already working and actively giving us those people and those opportunities that will help the seed to grow. Can we open our eyes to see what God is doing in our midst? Can we become still, give up control of the growing, wait and watch the seed that God is planting in us begin to grow and flourish! And then, can we become fellow-gardeners with God nourishing the seed but always knowing that the growth is a gift of God to us?

**\*\*\* Have one of the children sow another few seeds**

III.

- a) Scripture
- b) Video clip

This parable is particularly fascinating to me. A tiny seed, but not the tiniest! A large bush but not a large over-powering tree, a pesky weed that grows where it will, something like a dandelion that springs up everywhere at this time of year, a medicinal plant that symbolized healing in biblical times! The kingdom of God is like that??

Often we see this parable rather simplistically. What is small will grow into what is large. That is what the kingdom of God is like. We need to all grow into larger churches, larger institutions etc. I do think the parable is speaking about power and growth. But the kind of power that is within a seed is not one that will exert its power by controlling everything that happens. Instead this power works through its healing properties, even providing shade for God's other creatures, the birds. But it also suggests that God's kingdom is unruly like a mustard seed—pesky, wild, uncontrollable, exasperating, even subversive.

Most of us are tempted to organize everything neatly, to interpret everything in neat categories, to be able to see only one way of being church. And then the Spirit of God comes along and messes with our categories and our ideas and even our convictions. And amidst that confusion and crisis we can become open to something new, something that has not yet come but is contained in the promise of a seed.

God is sowing seeds generously among us. Can we name some of these seeds that are beginning to sprout? God is sending all that is needed for these seeds to grow and flourish! Can we see what God is doing in our midst? In every seed there is a promise. Can we see this promise amidst the challenges and confusion and crisis that sometimes seems to signal only death and destruction rather than new life and new energy? Can we look to the Spirit of God moving where it will, and align ourselves with that movement? Then we may find that we will dance to a new tune, one not yet composed but one that will include all of us in its rich melodies and harmonies. May God do this work among us.

Amen.

**\*\*\* have one of the children sow the last of the seeds.**